

Introduction

The author identifies himself as James (1:1); he was probably the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). Four men in the NT have this name. The author of this letter could not have been the apostle James, who died too early (A.D. 44) to have written it. The other two men named James had neither the stature nor the influence of the writer of this letter.

James was one of several brothers of Christ, probably the oldest since he heads the list in Matthew 13:55. At first he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him and misunderstood his mission (John 7:2–5). Later he became very prominent in the church:

1. He was one of the select individuals Christ appeared to after his resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:7).
2. Paul called him a “pillar” of the church (Galatians 2:9).
3. Paul, on his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, saw James (Galatians 1:19).
4. Paul did the same on his last visit (Acts 21:18).
5. When Peter was rescued from prison, he told his friends to tell James (Acts 12:17).
6. James was a leader in the important council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).
7. Jude could identify himself simply as “a brother of James” (Jude 1:1), so well-known was James.

He was martyred c. A.D. 62.

Date

Some date the letter in the early 60s. There are indications, however, that it was written before A.D. 50:

1. Its distinctively Jewish nature suggests that it was composed when the church was still predominantly Jewish.
2. It reflects a simple church order—officers of the church are called “elders” (5:14) and “teachers” (3:1).

3. No reference is made to the controversy over Gentile circumcision.
4. The Greek term *synagoge* (“synagogue” or “meeting”) is used to designate the meeting or meeting place of the church (2:2).

If this early dating is correct, this letter is the earliest of all the NT writings—with the possible exception of Galatians.

Recipients

The recipients are identified explicitly only in 1:1: “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” Some hold that this expression refers to Christians in general, but the term “twelve tribes” would more naturally apply to Jewish Christians. Furthermore, a Jewish audience would be more in keeping with the obviously Jewish nature of the letter (e.g., the use of the Hebrew title for God, *kyrios sabaoth*, “Lord Almighty,” 5:4). That the recipients were Christians is clear from 2:1; 5:7–8. It has been plausibly suggested that these were believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen’s death, were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (see Acts 8:1; 11:19). This would account for James’s references to trials and oppression, his intimate knowledge of the readers and the authoritative nature of the letter. As leader of the Jerusalem church, James wrote as pastor to instruct and encourage his dispersed people in the face of their difficulties.

Distinctive Characteristics

Characteristics that make the letter distinctive are: (1) its unmistakably Jewish nature; (2) its emphasis on vital Christianity, characterized by good deeds and a faith that works (genuine faith must and will be accompanied by a consistent lifestyle); (3) its simple organization; (4) its familiarity with Jesus’ teachings preserved in the Sermon on the Mount (compare 2:5 with Matthew 5:3; 3:10–12 with Matthew 7:15–20; 3:18 with Matthew 5:9; 5:2–3 with Matthew 6:19–20; 5:12 with Matthew 5:33–37); (5) its similarity to Old Testament wisdom writings such as Proverbs; (6) its excellent Greek.

Barker, Kenneth L. NIV Study Bible (Fully Revised): James. 1918-1919. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 1985, 1995, 2002.